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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: poverty eradication

Statement submitted by the Sisters of Charity Federation, Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and VIVAT International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.5/2011/1.

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Statement

Poverty and climate change

1. Adopted by the delegates to the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), the Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development proposes a new and strengthened approach to social development and gives high priority to promoting social justice and universal respect for human rights, to ensuring a society of non-violence and to protecting the integrity and sustainable use of the environment.

2. The consequences of climate change, which directly or indirectly render persons living in poverty even more vulnerable and less resilient to the social, economic and environmental stresses in their societies, are in direct opposition to their aspirations, undermining attempts to promote social development, violating human rights and destabilizing societies through violent civil conflict. Plans to mitigate climate change and adapt to its consequences must, therefore, be incorporated into any attempt to eradicate poverty.

Climate change and social development

3. According to the *Human Development Report 2007/2008: Fighting Climate Change: Human Solidarity in a Divided World*, climate change is the defining human development issue of our generation, a cross-cutting issue with the potential to obstruct efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

4. *Goal 1 aims to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.* However, climate change is expected to change the path and rate of economic growth, thus increasing poverty through reduced income opportunities, and projected to alter regional food security, especially in Africa where food security is expected to worsen.

5. *Goal 2 aims to achieve universal primary education.* However, because of climate change, loss of livelihood assets, natural disasters and displacement reduce educational opportunities.

6. *Goals 4, 5, 6 are health-related, aiming to combat major diseases, reduce infant mortality and improve maternal health.* However, climate change increases heat-related mortality and illness and the prevalence of vector-borne diseases, which especially affect pregnant women and children.

7. By hampering efforts to deliver on the promise of the Millennium Development Goals, climate change undermines attempts to eradicate poverty and to achieve equity and equal opportunity for all. It leads to a future in which progress in social development built up over generations will be reversed and the poorest 40 per cent of the world's citizens consigned to even greater poverty and diminished opportunity.

Climate change and human rights

8. In 2008, the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution 7/23 on human rights and climate change, in which the Council recognized that climate change posed an immediate and far-reaching threat to people and communities around the world. Indeed, it is set to undermine basic human rights on a massive

scale, with the rights of people living in poverty particularly at risk,[1] for example, their right to life, liberty and security (article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights); right to an adequate standard of living, including clothing, medical care and necessary social service (article 25); right to participate in government, public services and cultural life (articles 21 and 27); and right to work and education (articles 23 and 26).

9. Thus, climate change is in direct opposition to the Copenhagen framework for action which maintains that the promotion of universal respect for all human rights is integral to the eradication of poverty.

Climate change and social stability

10. By creating conditions that lead to social destabilization and obstructing the implementation of policies that promote poverty eradication, violent civil conflict further exacerbates the marginalization and vulnerability of people living in poverty.

11. While it is recognized that violent conflicts may be due to a variety of socio-economic factors and that climate change is not the sole cause, it nevertheless does serve as a trigger in the face of scarce resources such as water or arable land. It may also ignite conflict where competition for resources between locals and populations resettled owing to climate-induced migration worsens pre-existing ethnic or social tensions.[2]

12. Besides destabilizing social institutions, civil conflict further degrades Earth's life support systems — the atmosphere, land and oceans — thereby exacerbating the consequences of climate change and adding to the threats to human security and obstructing the commitment agreed to in Copenhagen ensuring non-violence within and among societies and to protecting the integrity of the environment.

Critical elements of good practice

13. This severe and disproportionate threat to human and ecological security requires that efforts to mitigate climate change and adapt to its consequences be

[1] "Oxfam International, Climate wrongs and human rights: putting people at the heart of climate-change policy". Oxfam, Briefing Paper 117, 2008. Available from www.oxfam.org/en/policy/bp117-climate-wrongs-and-human-rights.

[2] Jennifer Wallace, "The security dimension of climate change", in The Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2009: into a Warming World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), pp. 63-66.

incorporated into effective plans to eradicate poverty. The submitting organizations recommend that these be based on the following critical elements of good practice:[3]

- Community-based assessment, planning, execution and evaluation
- Participation by those most directly affected by the programme
- Creativity in problem solving
- Utilization of skills and knowledge of both women and men
- Multiplicity of benefits to impact the whole community
- Preservation and protection of ecological integrity
- Replicability of design and implementation
- Sustainability of the programme

A moral imperative

14. Climate change affects everyone, but there are three constituencies with no political voice especially threatened by climate change, making action to cope with it a moral imperative:

Persons who are living in poverty. This marginalized and excluded group, 70 per cent of whom are women, are on the front lines of climate change, whether in the Sudan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, the United States of America (e.g., New Orleans, Louisiana), or Australia. They bear the brunt of its manifestations, for which they are not mainly responsible.

Persons displaced by climate change. Sometimes referred to as "climate refugees" because their displacement is neither free nor spontaneous, these persons are forced to migrate within countries and across borders by human-induced climate change and the socio-economic conditions that either contribute to it or come in its wake. Thus, they are rendered homeless and, for an increasing number, stateless, without civil protection and the resources to provide for their basic human needs.

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[3] The listed elements of good practice are based on a field survey of social integration/inclusion in grass-roots communities and a synthesis of research on best practices utilized by women coping with climate change. The survey on social integration was conducted by the NGO Committee on Social Development with the support of the United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service, and a report by the Committee, *Social Integration in Action: Stories from the Grassroots*, which includes examples of these best practices and can be accessed from http://ngosocdev.wordpress.com/category/survey-on-social-integration. A report on the research on best practices utilized by women coping with climate change, conducted by members of the NGO Committee Subcommittee on Women and Climate Change, is included with the information sheets found on the Women and Climate Change webpage of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women, New York (www.ngocsw.org). The following websites also contain documents which outline good practices that illustrate these elements: www.dainet.org/sdnp/success.htm; www.ausaid.gov.au/closeup/gender_adaptation.cfm; and http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=46131.

Note: statement also endorsed and supported by the following non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council: Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul; Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd; Congregations of St Joseph; International Presentation Association of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary; Passionists International; UNANIMA International.

Future generations. While persons living in poverty suffer most severely the consequences of climate change today, in the future no one will escape. As noted in the Copenhagen Declaration, our responsibility extends beyond the present to future generations; equity among generations must be ensured.

15. In sum, taking climate change into account in efforts to promote a society that is poverty free is a matter of justice and equity. As noted in article 3 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, "The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities."